

DEVILS, DETRACTORS AND DOGMA :
THE DORMITION AND ASSUMPTION OF OUR LADY
IN THE BRUSSELS PLAY
“DIE SEVENSTE BLISCAP VAN ONSER VROUWEN”
AND THE ENGLISH “N-TOWN” CYCLE PLAY OF THE
DEATH, ASSUMPTION, AND CORONATION OF THE VIRGIN

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The focus of this paper is on the dramatic presentation of the group of events which close the earthly life of Mary, the Mother of Christ: her Dormition (or “falling asleep”, as her death was sometimes described), Assumption (body and soul) into Heaven, and her Coronation as Queen of Heaven. It considers the Brussels play of the “Sevenste Bliscap” (the seventh Joy of Mary) and the English N-town cycle’s presentation of the same Dormition and Assumption material. In particular, it investigates the role of Jews, devils and other detractors in dramatically portraying the dogma relating to our Lady’s role in salvation history.

But first, some theological context for the dramatic representations is needed. (Except where otherwise indicated, information is obtained from the Catholic Encyclopaedia.)

The feast of the Assumption, promulgated only in 1950 but given strong credence from the early centuries of the Church’s history, is the principal feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary (as well as the patronal feast of South Africa). It is also called *Pausatio*, *Nativitas* (for heaven), *Mors*, *Depositio*, or *Dormitio Sancta Mariae*. Its celebration has a double object:

1. the joyful departure of Mary from this life to the next, and
2. the assumption of her body into heaven.

It is not founded in Scripture or on history, but relies on the Apostolic tradition. Neither its time nor its place is certain. Sources give various dates between 3 and 15 years after the Ascension. Many place it in AD 48, citing Mary’s age then as 60. It is said to have occurred at either Jerusalem or Ephesus, where St. John, into whose care Christ gave Mary at the Crucifixion, spent time preaching. (Her tomb is shown to Jerusalem pilgrims, but was unknown for the first six centuries.)

Specifically, the belief in the corporeal assumption of Mary is founded on the apocryphal treatise *De Obitu S. Dominae*, which bears the name of St John, although falsely, as it belongs only to the 4th or 5th century. It is also found in the book *De Transitu Virginis* and in a letter wrongly attributed to St Denis the Areopagite. As to genuine writings, in the East it is mentioned in sermons of St Andrew of Crete, St John Damascene, and others, while in the West, St Gregory of Tours is the first to mention it (*De gloria mart.*, I, iv). (The sermons attributed to St Jerome and St Augustine are spurious.)

The tradition of the Church of Jerusalem is formulated thus by St John Damascene: “St Juvenal, Bishop of Jerusalem, at the Council of Chalcedon (451), made known to the Emperor Marcian and Pulcheria, who wished to possess the body of the Mother of God, that Mary died in the presence of all the Apostles, but that her tomb, when opened upon the request of St Thomas, was found empty; wherefrom the Apostles concluded that the body was taken up to heaven.”

[P.G., I, 96]

As to its history, the feast was celebrated in Palestine, Egypt and Arabia before the year 500 and from the sixth century in Gaul, although in January rather than August, according to the Egyptian practice, until the introduction of the Roman Rite. In the Greek Church, both January and August were kept, in different places. Hence the Emperor Maurice (582-602) set the feast for the Greek Empire on 15 August (*Liber Pontificalis* II, 508). In Rome the feast was celebrated in the Church of S. Maria Maggiore from at least the sixth century and became one of the principal festivities.

The Church never formally defined whether Mary died or not (as is reflected by the wide variety of Byzantine names for the feast [Nassif 1997: 322]), and the integrity of the doctrine of the Assumption would not be impaired if she did not in fact die, but the almost universal consensus is that she did. Simon Claude Mimouni holds that there were three distinct phases in the Church’s reflection on the end of Mary’s life. The oldest writings affirm the Dormition (with Mary’s soul being taken up to heaven and her body, preserved from corruption, being hidden away by angels until the final resurrection); intermediate writings describe a Dormition followed by an Assumption, while the latest pieces present only Mary’s Assumption, some with a resurrection after her death, others without either death or resurrection [Tavard n.d.:188].

The liturgies for the feast of the Assumption, as well as the Nativity of the Virgin, her Presentation at the Temple, and her (Immaculate) Conception, introduced into the Western Church during the seventh and eighth centuries, were based largely on the anonymous Latin *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (fourth or fifth century, though the manuscript is more recent), which claims to have been written by St Matthew and translated by St Jerome. This apocryphal gospel compiled its Nativity and Infancy narratives from the Greek *Protoevangelium of James* (second century, though it purports to have been written by the Apostle James the Less, also described as “the brother of the Lord”) and the Greek Infancy Gospel of Thomas (second or third century; originally Gnostic, but only extant in a more orthodox recension) which extravagantly magnifies the divine aspect of the boy Jesus. The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, which is full of marvels

and iconic imagery, was incredibly popular, as is indicated by the fact that translations survive in Old and Middle English, Anglo-Norman, Old French, medieval Italian, Provençal, Welsh and Czech [Hall, 2002:119].

By promulgating the Bull *Munificentissimus Deus* on 1 Nov 1950, Pope Pius XII thus confirmed centuries of popular and learned belief by declaring infallibly that the Assumption of the BVM was a dogma of the Catholic faith. Likewise, the Second Vatican Council taught in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* that “the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, when her earthly life was over, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things” (n. 59).

Over the centuries, the Fathers and Doctors of the Church had often discussed the fittingness of the privilege of Mary’s Assumption. The speculative grounds considered included:

1. her freedom from sin (Pope Pius IX’s Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* of 1854 officially declared her to have been immaculately conceived, exempt from all stain of original sin, in view of the merits of the child Jesus whom she was to bear, but the feast was already celebrated in the late seventh century, at least in the East, and was well known in the West by the eleventh century);
2. her motherhood of God (the fifth-century Council of Ephesus declared her *Theotokos*, but she is also the spiritual mother of humankind, by means of her consent to the Incarnation of the Word – the head of the mystical body whose members we are – and to the sacrifice of the Cross; hence she is the mother of the “new Adam” [Christ] and the antitype of Eve, our sinful natural mother);
3. her perpetual virginity (apocryphally derived, but held to be an article of faith even before the time of the primitive redaction of the Creed), and, crucially,
4. her role in and union with the salvific work of Christ.

As we shall see, all these motivations feature prominently in the dramatic representations of her death and assumption, as do some of the tropes by which she is described in the early liturgy, when Marian devotion began to flourish as an integral part of the Church’s life: “the beautiful chamber from which the worthy spouse comes forth, the light of the gentiles, the hope of the faithful, the spoiler of the demons, the confusion of Jews, the vessel of life, the tabernacle of glory, the heavenly temple ...” [P.L. LXII, 245].

Her contrast with Eve is one of the most important of these tropes, both in the liturgy and dogma, and in the dramatic representations. The sub-apostolic author of the Epistle to Diognetus, writing to a pagan inquirer concerning the Christian mysteries, describes Mary as the great antithesis of Eve, a conceit which appears repeatedly in other writers such as Justin and Tertullian, well before the time of the Council of Ephesus. But it is St Irenaeus (c. 130 – 200) who may best be described as the first theologian of the Virgin Mother. He drew out the parallel between Eve and Mary, urging that, “as the former was led astray by an angel’s discourse to fly from God after transgressing His word, so the latter by an angel’s discourse had the Gospel preached unto her that she might bear God, obeying His word. And if the former had disobeyed God, yet the other was persuaded to obey God: that the Virgin Mary might become an advocate for the virgin Eve. And as

mankind was bound unto death through a virgin, it is saved through a virgin; by the obedience of a virgin the disobedience of a virgin is compensated.” [Irenaeus V 19]

St John Damascene (c.647-c.749) wrote three famous sermons on the Virgin’s Assumption, some very much influenced by the apocryphal *Transitus Mariae* (fourth or fifth century, and probably an orthodox reworking of a Gnostic document, but ascribed to St John the Apostle, and sometimes referred to as the *Evangelium Joannis*) on which many episodes in the plays of the Assumption are based. These sermons describe Mary as “the greatest and dearest of all God’s gifts” and even as “a spiritual Eden, holier and more divine than the Eden of old”. They show how death, “which of old was feared and hated ... the harbinger of grief, dejection, tears and sadness” becomes in the case of Mary’s Dormition “a matter of praise and blessing ... the cause of joy and rejoicing”. He explains: “Oh how does the source of life pass through death to life? ... She dies according to the flesh, destroys death by death, and through corruption gains incorruption ... therefore I will not call [her] sacred transformation death, but rest or going home” and “She meets death without fear, who conceived death’s destroyer, if indeed we may call her holy and vivifying departure by the name of death. For how could she who brought life to all, be under the dominion of death? But she obeys the law of her own Son, and inherits this chastisement as a daughter of the first Adam, since her Son, who is the life, did not refuse it.”

These texts and sermons appear to have influenced the action of some of the dramatic representations of the Dormition, for example in the following description: “O sacred and wonderful holy and worshipful body, ministered to now by angels, standing by in lowly reverence. Demons tremble: men approach with faith, honouring and worshipping her, greeting her with eyes and lips, and drawing down upon themselves abundant blessings.” But they also contribute a second trope as important as the contrasting of Mary with Eve : the comparison of her life and death with those of her divine Son. This, too, is of ancient origin. St. Ignatius of Antioch, whose life reached back into apostolic times, wrote to the Ephesians (c. 18-19) relating the mysteries of Our Lord’s life more closely with those of the Virgin Mary. For instance, he enumerates the virginity of Mary and her childbirth along with Christ’s death as three mysteries hidden from the devil’s knowledge. St John Damascene’s sermons explicitly echo Christ’s death in describing Mary’s, for instance when he writes: “That holy one gave up her spirit into the hands of her Son”, just as Christ commended his spirit into his Father’s hands. He writes of illnesses being cured at Mary’s death (also echoing the apocryphal miracles connected with Christ’s virgin birth), and of the demons being put to flight and banished to the regions of darkness, just as Christ “harrows” hell after his own death. He even presents the apocryphal story of the Jew who attacks Mary’s bier as an explicit parallel with the servant of Caiaphas who strikes Jesus during his cross-examination by the high priest.

This comparison of Mary’s life and death with that of Christ, along with the contrast between her and Eve, are formative in the dramatic representations of the Dormition and Assumption. In addition, the plays (or at least some of them) make use of another form of contrast – with an alien Other of evil, represented in the main by devils and Jews – two distinctly different “enemies”, yet sometimes conflated, by the “demonisation” of the

Jews, particularly in terms of their discourse. (A further conflation with the discourse of Islamic worship is not unknown.) If one remembers that England, at least, had expelled her Jewish population around the year 1300, one becomes aware that, for the late-medieval playwrights and audiences of the mystery cycles, Jews were actually almost as much of an “unknown Other” as devils and demons.

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When we look at the English cycle plays of the Dormition and Assumption, we find that the York writers extended the material into four plays: the Death, the Burial (lost, but known as the Play of Fergus), the Appearance to Thomas, and the Assumption and Coronation. The subject matter appears to have been of such interest that the play was detached for separate performance [Happe, 1975/85: 625]. At Chester the corresponding play is described as performed by the “wives”, but the text is now lost. The missing Towneley version may have been torn out of the manuscript in the sixteenth century, due to the Reformation.

At York, too, references indicate that the play was given until 1542, but that by 1548 it was specifically prohibited. There was a revival under Queen Mary in 1554, but the prohibition was re-imposed when the cycle was performed in 1561.

The York play, written for a pageant cart, avoids the difficulties of staging the actual assumption. Happe [1975/85: 625] describes it as notable for its gentle and restrained tone, and more of a poem than a play. In addition, it lacks devil characters and the section which would have contained a role for the Jews is missing. We shall thus rather consider the N-Town version as our English example.

The N-town cycle is unique in various ways, notably its “simultaneous staging” of the Last Supper and the meeting of the Sanhedrin with Judas’s betrayal of Christ, as well as its focus on the Blessed Virgin, particularly in the “Mary Play” (which deals with the period from the beginning of her life to the end of Christ’s non-public life) and the penultimate section on which we will be concentrating.

At the very beginning of the “Mary Play” (the play of the Root of Jesse), the prophet Isaiah announces:

That a clene mayde thourgh meke obedyens
Shall bere a childe which xal do resystens
Ageyn foule Zabulon, the devyl of helle;
Mannys soule ageyn hym to defend,
Obyn in the felde the fend he xal felle.

The prophet Micah adds the salvific contrast identified above:

Evyn lyke as Eve modyr of wo was,
So xal a maydyn be modyr of blyss.

Various miracles are also associated with Mary, forming a parallel with those performed by her Son. For example, in the N-town “Trial of Mary and Joseph” which results from her unexpected pregnancy, the couple are verbally attacked by two “detractors” called

Bakbytere and Reysesclaundyr. One of them drinks the potion which has proved Joseph and Mary innocent (thinking it to be only a placebo, since the “guilt” of at least one of them would seem to be plainly visible) and falls about in great distress, his head “burning”, but when he repents his detraction of Mary, he is healed. So, too, in the Nativity play, the second midwife doubts Mary’s continued virginity (announced by her colleague), and her arm withers when she tests the Virgin. An angel tells her to worship the baby Jesus, touching his clothes, which she does, also asking Mary’s pardon, and her hand is restored.

The play of the Assumption of Mary attributes its material (though not by name) to the apocryphal text identified above, the *De Obitu S. Dominae*

That Seynt Jhon the Euangelist wrot and tauht, as I lere,
In a book clepid apocriphum.

It gives great detail, which it attributes to “*Legenda Sanctorum*”, such as Mary’s having conceived Christ at the age of 14 and given birth at 15, then surviving him by 12 years, to make her 60 at her death.

We see the Jewish priests gathering (as at the time of the Last Supper) to combat the threat of “heresy”. Having slain Christ, they note that

His dame is levying, Mary that men call;
Myche pepil halt hire wythall.
Wherfore, in peyne of reprefe,
Yif we suffre hyre thus to relefe,
Oure lawys sche shal make to myschefe,
And meche schame don vs sche shall.

They cannot slay or imprison Mary and Christ’s other followers for fear of a popular uprising, but devise another plan:

But be that seustere ded, Mary, that fise,
We shal brenne here body and the aschis hide,
And don here all the dispith we can here devise,
And than sle tho disciplis that walkyn so wyde,
And here bodyes devyde.

They ready their “knights” and “tormentors” for when Mary is dead, hoping it will not be long:

And but she deye the sunere, the devyl smyte of here hed!

In the next scene, Mary prays to be united again with Christ, and He (as Sapientia) sends an angel to tell her that she will in fact die in three days’ time. The angel bears a palm branch from Paradise to be carried before her bier (a possible reminder of Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem). Mary expresses two wishes – first, for the apostles to be present (which is effected in due course by means of clouds which suddenly carry them from the various cities in which they are preaching), and secondly,

Also I beseke my sone I se not the fende
What tyme outh of this wor[l]d I schal passe hens.
His horrible lok wold fere me so hende;
Ther is nothyng I dowte but his dredfull presens.

The angel reminds her that she need have no fear:

What nedith it to fere you, empres so hende,
Syn be the fruth of youre body was convycte his vyolens?
That horrible serpent dar not nyhyn youre kende;
And yowre blosme schal make hym recistens
That he schal not pretende.

This motif of fear does appear in the apocryphal texts, but its use in the dramatic representation is interesting in that the audience may view Mary's approaching death in two ways. As the sinless Mother of God, she naturally has nothing to fear, and this is what the Church teaches. Yet as a human being, albeit a sinless one, she is in a way representative of each member of the audience, and her fear makes her all the more human.

There are constant reminders of earlier stages in salvation history – for example, her prayer “magnifies” God's name, as did her Magnificat at the time of the Visitation, and she speaks of the apostles coming

To bere my body, that bare Jesu, oure Savyoure.

As her “adopted” son, John is fittingly the first of the apostles to arrive, and she tells him about the Jews' plotting:

Secretly they ordeyne in here conseytis felle
When my sowle is paste, where Godis liste is,
To brenne my body and schamly it quelle,
For Jesu was of me born, that they slew wyth here fistis.

John promises to prevent this, and also points out to the other apostles that they should not speak sadly of Mary's death,

For anon to the Jewys it schuld than notyd be
That we were ferd of deth, and that is ageyn that we teche
For we seyn all tho belevyn in the holy Trynyte,
They schul evyr leve and nouth deye; this truly we preche.

The apostles watch beside Mary's bed, so that when Christ comes

He may fynde vs wakyng and redy wyth oure lithtis

- an echo of both the three sleeping apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane and the Wise Virgins of the parable in Matt. 25.

Jesus then descends to Mary, to sing her “dirige” along with the heavenly choir, though she, in humility, says that an angel would have sufficed. As her soul leaves her body to “rest in [Christ's] bosom”, He directs the apostles to take her body to a newly-made grave in the Valley of Josephat and bury it with all solemnity (presumably entombment is what is referred to here as burial), then to wait three days for Him to re-appear and “comfort [their] adversity”. Like her Son, thus, Mary will spend three days in the tomb. So, too, Peter prays Mary:

O swete soule of Mary, prey thy sone vs defende;
Haue mynde of thy pore brether when thou comyst to thi tron.

- a clear reminder of the Good Thief at Christ's Crucifixion.

As the bier is carried, the Jewish priests are concerned (hearing the noise of the angelic choir responding to the apostles singing the funeral psalm (*Exiit Israel de Egipto...*))

2. Pr:

But sweche another nowse herd I neuyr er.

Myn herte gynnyth ogyl and quake for fer ...

The “bishop”, Episcopus, speaking very much in the discourse of devils, calls the knights and tormentors to fetch her body and kill the disciples, to which the priests respond with the alliterative threats usually associated in the cycle plays with devils and tyrants. His discourse also adduces Mohammed (“Mahound”), in a manner familiar to the plays, where the prophet of Islam is often demonised.

Ep:

Outh! Harrow! The devyl is in myn hed!

Ye dodemvsyd princes, faste yow away,

Or I make avow to Mahound, your bodyes schul blede,

Now that quene is ded!

Ye coward knytys in plate,

And ye tormentours, thryfe schul ye late!

Faste, harlotys, go youre gate,

And brynge me that bychyd body, I red!

When they reach the scene, though, two of the priests find themselves powerless:

I am ful wo, mad is my thowth!

and

I am so ferd I wol fayn fle!

The devyl hym spede hedyr me brouth!

But the First Priest recklessly rushes the bier and attempts to upset it, ending up hanging from it by his hands in great distress, and praying Peter (whom he says he helped at Caiaphas’s house when the maidservant identified him as one of Christ’s followers) to “preye thy God for me here”. (This episode is presumably the matter of the missing York “Fergus” play.) Peter tells him to believe in Christ as his Saviour and that Mary is His (i.e. God’s) mother, which he does, and he is released. Here we thus have a conversion as well as a miracle, like the conversion of the “Good Thief” at the Crucifixion.

The priest is then sent, with the palm branch, to convert other Jews, thereby healing their illnesses. He does so, after Mary’s body has been buried (entombed) with incense, benediction and chanting.

1. Pr:

Ye Jewys that langour in this gret infyrmyte,

Belevyth in Crist Jesu and ye schal haue helthe.

Throw vertu of this holy palme that com fro the Trinite,

Yowur sekenesse schal aswage and restore you to welthe.

2 Pr:

I beleve in Crist Jesu, Goddis sone in vnyte,

And forsake my mavmentryes, fals in here fylthe.

[He touches the palm and is healed]

A, I thanke the, gracyous Lord, and thy moder of pete.

Now ar we hol of oure seknesse and of our foul belthe.

The 3rd Priest, however, rejects them, calling on devils:

3 Pr:

What, harlotys, forsake oure lawe?

2 Pr:

So hald I beste the do.

3 Pr

Hens fro me in the develis name ye go!

I deye! Outh, outh! Harro!

The wyld develys mot me to-drawe!

Which they do with great glee, when thus called upon:

1 Demon:

Herke, Belsabub and Belyal, Sere Sathan in the herne,

Vs fettyn oure servauntis to this preson!

Blow flanys of fer to make hem to brenne;

Mak redy ageyn we com to this, demon!

2 Demon:

Faste for tho harlotis now let vs renne,

To caste hem in this pet here that depe is adon,

They schul brenne, and boyle, and chille in oure denne!

Go we now, a devvelys name, as faste as we mon.

Harrow, harrow, we com to town!

1 Demon:

Drag we these harlotis in hye

Into the pet of helle for to lye!

2 Demon:

Go we now, helle houndis, ye crye;

Sere Sathan may heryn our son!

This scene is immediately followed by Christ's descent to Mary's tomb, to raise her with great solemnity – a very great contrast to the foregoing "diablerie". Christ asks the apostles what honour ["worschepe and grace"] he should do Mary, and John replies:

Lord, as thou rose from deth and regnyst in thyn empere,

So reyse thou this body to thy blysse that lyth is.

Vs semyth this ryth is.

(The comparison with Christ is explicit here: "as ... so...".) Michael agrees on behalf of the angels:

Ya, gloryous God, lo, the sowle here prest now

To this blissid body likyth it yow to fest now;

Hefne and erthe wold thynke this the best now

Inasmych as sche bare you, God in youre mythtis.

Mary's soul then returns to her body, as she is praised by Christ as the dove, the tabernacle of joy, the heavenly temple, and other tropes from the liturgy. He tells her:

Ye schal haue the blysse wyth me, moder, that hath non ende.

For as ye were clene in erthe of alle synnys greyn,

So schul ye reyne in hefne clennest in mend.

On her ascent, she is crowned in heaven, to the accompaniment of human and angelic music.

Christ:

You to worchepe, moder, it likyth the holy Trinyte,
Wherefore I crowne you here in this kyndam of glory.
Of alle my chosyn, thus schul ye clepyd be:
Qwen of Hefne and Moder of mercy.

The archangel Michael concludes the play with praise on behalf of those dwelling in heaven, suggesting that those on earth (the audience) should follow suit:

Now blysid be youre namys, we cry!
For this holy assumpeyon alle hefne maketh melodye.
Deo gracias.

This Coronation is followed by the brief Judgement Day play.

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If we turn now to the Brussels play, “Die sevenste bliscap van Onser Vrouwen” (c. 1455; Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, II 478), its history is as follows.

In 1348, a miraculous statue of Our Lady was brought from Amsterdam to Brussels, an event which was commemorated with an annual procession (on the Sunday before Pentecost). In 1448 the Brussels magistracy added the annual performance of one of a cycle of seven mystery plays in the “rederijker” style, each play on one of the Seven Joys of Our Lady. This performance was to last till 1566, ending, as was the case in England, as a result of the religious strife of the time.

Of the seven plays, only the first and last survive, in a version apparently dating from 1455-1461. The play of the “First Joy” (2081 lines) treats of the Annunciation, and the Seventh (1733 lines) of the Assumption. The intervening plays, which are summarised in a “Naprologhe” (epilogue) were on the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, the finding of Christ among the Doctors in the Temple, the Resurrection and the Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

After a first scene in which Mary and John speak of Christ and salvation history, and Mary mentions her intention of visiting the places of the Passion in sorrowful devotion, the second scene shows the Jews objecting to her posthumously reverencing Christ and allegedly creating a sect:

Als quansus hi ware een coninc der Joden.

So much so that they complain she is more of a nuisance than her Son, and determine to lodge an official complaint:

Noyt so veel scanden
En hadden de Joden van haren kinde,
Also si hier af wel mochten ten inde,

Waert so datmens niet en vermaende
Vor den rechter.

Then they realise that, if they do prevail upon the authorities to put her to death, they will face a potentially greater problem – the creation of relics, which have considerable influence in conversion:

2 Jode:

Als si doot blijft,
Wat meyndi, wat mochter af gescien
Met haren lichame? Tes vremder gesien.
Ja, mochten sine onder hen gewinnen,
Haer vriende die noch Jhesum minnen,
Si soudener reliquien willen af maken,
Tot onsen spite.

1 Jode:

Dat sijn de saken;
Daer soudense den duvel met allen af brouwen
En tfolc bekeren.

As in the N-Town play, the discourse of the Jews associates them with the devil and the demonic. Their ultimate decision is to see to it that her body is burnt, and the ashes cast to the wind.

In the meantime, Mary laments the loss of her Son, while Christ in heaven sends Gabriel to her with a palm branch to announce His will – a visit with distinct echoes of the Annunciation, particularly since, in this play, Gabriel is identified. In three days' time, she will be exalted above all in heaven. Mary asks that God shield her eyes from the sight of the devil, but Gabriel reminds her that the devil is actually afraid of her, since she is the only being other than the Trinity with power over devils. Mary also asks that the apostles be with her at her deathbed, to take her leave of them as well as to prevent the Jews from attacking her body. Gabriel promises that this will be done (which it is) and Mary praises Christ joyfully for the news of her passing. Soon the apostles begin to arrive, first John, carried on a cloud (actually, according to the stage directions, wrapped in a cloak carried by two angels). They praise Mary for her role in salvation.

After a brief pause, Lucifer summons the denizens of hell, with threats and insults, charging them with the attempt to gain Mary's soul. He refers to her (and to Christ) by euphemisms, such as "The mother of the man who harrowed our hell", avoiding her name, which was considered a powerful force in exorcism. At the same time, of course, his circumlocutions remind the audience of Mary's role in salvation – the foremost grounds for her assumption.

The two minor devils, though dutiful, are aware that their task is impossible, and afraid of Mary. Although she is human (as Lucifer argues) she has more power over them than any other human being. In the event, it does not come to a confrontation with the Mother of God, as Mary's request is fulfilled. On their way, the devils are countered by the archangel Michael, who points out that, though Mary is a human being and they do have a historical right to the souls of sinful humanity (since the Fall), she is free from sin, and

thus, exceptionally, not fit prey for them. Michael recalls the prophecy of Genesis 3:15, that Mary, reversing the sin of Eve, would crush the head of the serpent beneath her heel (as well as various other related passages) and the devils leave in defeat.

In the next scenes Christ summons the angels, martyrs and patriarchs to prepare to welcome Mary after her assumption and praise her salvific role, while on earth Mary takes her leave of the apostles and dies. John reminds the others not to mourn her passing, since they preach that Christ's Resurrection has overcome death, and the "envious" Jews could then derogate them as hypocrites. As they prepare her body for burial, the maidens discover that it is not necessary to wash her. The apostles praise her as they place the body on the bier. They are told by Christ to take her to a newly-made grave in the Vale of Josephat, echoing his own entombment. They are to watch by her for three days, just as Christ himself spent three days in the tomb. Then He will reveal His intentions.

As the apostles carry the bier, singing "Exit de Egypto" with an angelic chorus, the Jews hear the disturbance and, gathering a crowd, arm themselves heavily in order to "turn the Christians' singing into weeping" and gain possession of Mary's body. Their leader attempts to commandeer the bier and to throw Mary's body off, and his hands and arms immediately wither in a fiery heat, while the other Jews are struck blind, as if the funeral procession has disappeared into thin air. Unfortunately some 350 lines are missing at this interesting point, but a miraculous healing and conversion probably followed.

The following few lines conclude an episode in which Thomas, returning from India and arriving late (just as he missed Christ's first post-Resurrection appearance to the assembled apostles and doubted the truth of the miracle), sees Mary's assumption into heaven, and is given her girdle by an angel, as proof, with the instruction to tell the other apostles, who have been hearing the rejoicing in heaven with great wonderment. They hasten to the grave, and find it empty, as did the three Maries who first visited Christ's grave. It is also perfumed with a wonderful savour, as the graves or deathbeds of saints were believed to be. Recognising the fullness of Mary's sanctity, the apostles pray that she will be their "advocet" with Christ, and praise her with many of the liturgical tropes discussed above, reminding us that her compassion will save many sinful souls from the clutches of the devil. They praise God for the great grace he has shown them, and then take their leave, to do his bidding by preaching his word across the world.

An epilogue follows, closing the performance with a prayer for the audience as well as a brief summary of the contents of the foregoing six plays.

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Thus the plays use, on the one hand, orthodox dogma on the Assumption and Mary's role in salvation (some of which derives from apocryphal rather than authoritative sources;

some of which later becomes authoritative) and, on the other hand (again, sometimes from apocryphal sources) a constructed Other of Evil, comprising devils, Jews and other enemies or detractors, merging the known and the unknown, the “real” and the imaginary, to create a force which ostensibly opposes the dogma, but in fact confirms it. At the same time, they confirm a notion of identity as located in the body and defined by both contrast / opposition and comparison / similarity. Both the anticipated (but miraculously frustrated) attacks by the Jews on the body of Our Lady on her bier and her assumption “body and soul” into heaven locate the “truth” of faith in a corporeal “reality”. The contrast between Mary and Eve (a “difference in similarity”), along with the straightforward opposition of the Jews to her, forms one pole of the definition, while the other is provided by the constant comparison of the events of her life and death with those of her divine Son – leading ultimately to her coronation alongside Him as Queen of Heaven.

The plays are late-medieval, from a period in which English society, at least, had long expelled its Jewish population, but they are based on apocryphal texts written and transmitted in late antiquity – a period when Christian/Jewish conflict was at times intense. In the later Roman Empire, citizenship was increasingly linked with orthodox Christian faith, and religious deviants, including Jews and Christian heretics, were legally excluded from the civic body and viewed as a sort of “internal Other” [Shoemaker, 1999: 778; 822]. Just as the earlier canonical Gospel narratives seek to establish a Christian identity consonant with that of the Roman Empire, playing down Christ’s Jewish identity and casting the guilt for His Crucifixion on the Jews as an alien Other, rather than on the real “aliens” in Palestine – the Romans – Shoemaker [1999] has shown historically that the ancient Dormition traditions in late antiquity (the first seven centuries of the Christian Era) reflect both the “fictional” establishment of Christian identity and genuine historical points of theological conflict between Judaism and early Christianity, notably on the issues of Mary’s virginity and the veneration of shrines, relics and images. According to Shoemaker [1999: 822], Mary (particularly in her Assumption and Coronation) becomes to the Jews of late antiquity an icon of the imperial state. Thus the plays of the Assumption, though written centuries after the events they depict and the religious conflicts which ensued, reflect an ongoing credence in the myths associated with nascent Christian identity which is not merely a matter of faith, but of politics.

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